

The English drama from the Middle Ages to the Restoration

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Medieval drama

General features

- ❧ Medieval drama flourished in the 15th century; it developed out of liturgical ceremonies: the origin of medieval plays can be found in the Church and in its rituals
- ❧ After music was introduced into churches (6th century) and words were later fitted to the melodies, a dramatic dialogue began to take place in the form of an alternation of chants between the priest and the choir
- ❧ Later processional and scenic effects were added which increased dramatic action: liturgical drama evolved into Miracle and Mystery plays and these ones into Morality plays



Medieval drama

Themes

- ❧ Mystery plays usually dealt with Gospel events: their main subject was the redemption of man
- ❧ Miracle Plays were concerned with episodes from the lives of saints
- ❧ Moralities too were religious plays, but they focused on the conflict between good and evil; their aim was to improve people's moral behaviour

Medieval drama

Structure

☞ The Miracles grew in popularity, so the plays left the Church to be performed first in the Church yard, then in other open spaces of the town


☞ Each play was repeated several times in different parts of the town with the help of a *pageant*, a carriage in the form of small house with two vertical rooms: in the lower room the actors prepared themselves, in the upper one they played their parts



Medieval drama

Language

- ❧ In the Miracles, Latin that was slowly replaced by vernacular, and secular elements became more and more frequent
- ❧ The Morality plays were didactic in content and allegorical in form. They presented personifications of vices and virtues and generalized characters. The lines were rhymed as in the Miracles, but the atmosphere was more melancholy



Medieval drama

Audience

- ☞ The cycles of Mystery plays appealed to all social classes, from royalty to peasants: they all came in to watch the plays. Cycles instilled a love of drama in the people
- ☞ Moralities were intended for more learned people, with some cultural background

Medieval drama

Authors and works

☞ The Myracle plays were grouped in 4 cycles, known by the names of the towns where they were performed: Chester, York, Coventry, Wakefield

☞ The best Morality play is *Everyman* (about 1500)





Elizabethan drama

General features

- ❧ Drama became the national literary manifestation of the time: the theatres were open to everybody
- ❧ Moralities and interludes were still a living memory, since they had instilled a great interest in drama in the people
- ❧ A new interest in classical drama had been introduced by Humanism

Elizabethan drama

Themes

- ❧ The theatre was a mirror of society, whose structure was modelled on the divine order of the universe, inside which man had to respect a precise hierarchy (God, angels, men, animals and inanimate objects): drama derived from the breaking of this order
- ❧ The new hero, full of passions and doubts, replaced the old allegorical character
- ❧ The relationship between the laws of man and nature was emphasized: prodigious phenomena were presented as consequence or presage of criminal actions

Elizabethan drama


Structure

❧ The theatres (*The Globe*, *The Swan*, *The Rose*), built on the model of the old inns, were designed as large wooden structures circular or octagonal in shape, with three tiers of galleries surrounding a yard or pit, open to the sky. The stage was divided in three parts: outer, inner and upper stage



❧ The scenery was very little: simple objects simbolized a place or the role of an actor (e.g., a table stood for a room, a crown for a king, etc.)






Elizabethan drama

Language

- ☞ The language, alive and direct, was affected by the concept of hierarchy
- ☞ Being in verse, the Elizabethan theatre borrowed from poetry the use of metaphors and the *blank verse*



Elizabethan drama

Audience

- ☞ The Elizabethan audience was a cross-section of society. All social classes went to the theatre: nobles, commoners, citizens, lawyers... people with different tastes and cultural background
- ☞ The audience were involved in the performance, since they were in direct communication with the actors

Elizabethan drama

Authors and works

🐉 C. Marlowe (1564-1593)

- Tamburlane the Great
- Doctor Faustus
- The Jew of Malta



🐉 B. Jonson (1572-1637)

- Volpone
- Bartholomew Fair



🐉 W. Shakespeare (1564-1616)

- Hamlet
- Romeo and Juliet
- King Lear...






Restoration drama

General features

- ☞ After the Republican period (1649-60), the theatres were re-opened (1660) and people began to attend playhouses again
- ☞ Drama was the branch of literature which best mirrored the society; it was affected by the new spirit of the time: imagination was replaced by reason



Restoration drama

Themes


- ❧ Drama included three main genres: heroic play, tragedy and comedy and turned to France (style) and Spain (plot) for inspiration; nevertheless it was able to preserve a national character
- ❧ The best expression of the new spirit of the time, however, was comedy: people went to the theatre mainly to be amused; they wanted humour, sex, wit and elegance
- ❧ Marriage was one of the main ingredients for creating intrigue, piquant situation or simply a conventional happy ending to the play

Restoration drama

Structure

- ☞ The new theatres were indoor and smaller than the Elizabethan ones
- ☞ The old platform stage was eliminated: only the back and the front stages remained and a scenery, painted in perspective, began to be used
- ☞ The audience was sitting in the dark, separated from the stage that was brightly lit and no longer bare






Restoration drama

Language

- ☞ The change in taste affected the language, too: playwrights used five-foot rhymed *couplets* for heroic plays, *blank verse* for the tragedies and prose in comedies
- ☞ The brilliance and perfection of the prose resulted from the witty sparkling dialogues, which were also the chief means of portraying the characters



Restoration drama

Audience

- ☞ As the Restoration privileged private rather than public theatres, the audience, mainly formed by courtiers, aristocrats and the upper middle class, became more and more socially restricted and homogeneous
- ☞ Drama became more and more a class drama and the national and popular character of the Elizabethan theatre disappeared forever


Restoration drama

Authors and works

 **John Dryden** (1631-1700)

- The conquest of Granada
- All for love



 **William Congreve** (1670-1729)

- The Way of the World
- Love for Love



Culture and Anarchy in British Drama

Culture is pursuit of perfection.

Culture is formed of religious practices.

Marlowe's Doctor Faustus

Ben Johnson's The Alchemist

Oliver Goldsmith's, She Stoops to
Conquer

John Gay The Begger's Opera

Middleton's The Changeling

Oscar Wilde's Importance of Being
Earnest

Bibliography and Internet resources

📖 **Marinoni, Mingazzini - The New Mirror of the Times - Vol. I - Principato**

📖 **Ansaldo, Giuli - The Golden String - Vol. I - Petrini**

📖 **Mystery and miracle plays:**

http://www.soquelhs.santacruz.k12.ca.us/theshow/scholastics/english/engl11/js_mystery.htm

📖 **Elizabethan drama:**

<http://www.elizreview.com/links.htm>

<http://the-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html>

📖 **Restoration drama:**

<http://ernie.bgsu.edu/~smorgan/publick/resthome.html>